on the overhead display moved as he brought them, with conscious control, to the readings McCoy considered normal.

"Well," said McCoy with an aggravating growl. "Not surprised? Pleased to be alive? Curious as to how we got you out?"

It took a long moment before Spock came back with "You may safely assume that I am curious "

"Just curious?" prodded McCoy. "Not grateful?"

Again the pause. "It would have been highly reprehensible not to rescue survivors once their location was known, Doctor; therefore I assume my rescue was due in large part to my own resourcefulness."

A good try, thought Kirk, but it lacked the usual zing. And Spock hadn't asked about his hands where they lay boxed in the regrowth units strapped to the bed. He tried for the tone of breaking up the traditional battles.

"Gentlemen, if you two don't mind, I have work to do, and it requires Mr. Spock's participation."

McCoy shrugged, started to try again to get a rise out of Spock, and then thought better of it. The door closed smoothly behind him.

"There were survivors, Captain?"

"You and T'serek and the two women. The Speaker."

Spock lay contemplating that without expression. Kirk wondered what he was thinking.

"Fifty percent fatality among those I took with me."

Kirk wouldn't make little of it, but he said "I gave you the wrong people. You brought half of them back. What went wrong?"

Spock gave him a bare recital of facts, with one significant ommission. Kirk had known him to lie before--social lies, lies in the interest of duty, lies to save face--and he would probably have done exactly the same thing, considering the lack of witnesses, the demise of the Romulans, and yet the deliberate deceit closed him off from Spock. He couldn't offer comfort if--officially--the Vulcan wasn't hurting. The dry recital of fact ran down with Spock's using the core tap to flood the volcano with magma, draining power off in a regular cycle that would serve as a beacon only to someone familiar with the old Earth code. Only when Spock mentioned S'Tyge's antimatter device did Kirk realize how close they had come to beaming it aboard.

"That would have been my last mistake," he said.

"Indeed, Captain. I have frequently observed how random factors favor you."

Spock's eyes were not even on Kirk as he said it, he was still tired, probably in pain, but for a frozen moment Kirk thought it was deliberate, some kind of slam or oblique reference to what had happened on Ixmahx.

"Not always," he said. "I guess that about covers it. Am I tiring you out?"

"No, Captain, but I am, in fact, fatigued."

Kirk stood up to go, feeling rebuffed, but the lightless look in Spock's face made him try one more time.

"I'm sorry it turned out so rough, Spock. I've had a taste or two of Romulan hospitality. It should be some satisfaction to know that the men who captured you are all dead. I, for one, won't miss them." He watched for a reaction, the feral glint he'd seen there when he was threatened.

"One should not rejoice in the death of any sentient being," was all Spock said.

They held services for the missing crewmen, McCoy released all of the survivors but Spock back to duty, but for some reason Kirk couldn't feel the pick-yourself-up-and-carry-on energy that should follow a successful mission, no matter how costly. Spock, withdrawn into frequent meditation to hasten the healing of his hands, was largely confined to his cabin. When Kirk did encounter him, he seemed to prefer solitude. Dray's duties kept him at a distance, burning with a softer if no less alluring fire, and Kirk saw him oftenest when they were both prowling the corridor in front of Spock's quarters. Nadia was busy in her lab. But the sense of unfinished business was so strong that the security call in the middle of the night was half-expected.

McCoy met him at the turbo lift, and they ran down the hall to the cabin a rather pale guard was securing. McCoy went in first, and stopped so suddenly that Kirk bumped into him.

"Good God!" A female crewmember lay tumbled in her sheets, broken, smeared crimson, obviously dead.

"Report!" Kirk snapped at the guard.

"I thought I heard something down this way, sir--a soft sound, like breathing or panting. Then I saw that--" he pointed to the carelessly smeared trail of blood that led a dozen feet down the corridor, smearing the wall, speckling the floor. "I opened the door and hit the alarm."

"Did you touch her?"

"No, sir. I mean, I was sure she was dead--and I wouldn't have known what to do anyway--" He was right, the amount of blood precluded ordinary first aid.

"All right, how about these other people?" The cabin stood in a corridor of similar accommodations.

"I asked if they were OK and told them to stay put."

Kirk alerted security throughout the ship without resorting to the battle stations siren, then had the guard turn out the inhabitants of nearby cabins. There were a few red faces, all male, as they came out into the corridor in hastily donned uniforms and leisure clothes. Kirk wondered why women never seemed embarrassed in such situations. Too pragmatic, probably. They all sobered when he told them what had happened. No, no one had heard anything, no one had seen anything.

He supposed the excellent soundproofing and a mind-your-own-business ethic in crew quarters could explain how a woman could have been approached, attacked and murdered within feet of her neighbors, but he didn't understand why none of the crewmen could remember seeing any other in the corridors--not even each other. An oriental woman in a kimono enlightened him on that topic. A simple spy eye showed red or green at either end of the corridor, indicating whether it was empty or not for the convenience of those who wished to be discrete about their sleeping arrangements. In other circumstances